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Indonesia struggles for hearts and minds in East Timor

By Peter Millership

Jakarta, Dec.17, Reuter - Armed Forces Commander Benny Murdani said there were still sporadic clashes between troops and Fretilin guerrilas in East Timor as Indonesia struggled to win the hearts and minds of the people. In one of the most authoritative official statements in the conflict in the former Portugese colony, general Murdani told Reuters in an exclusive interview :"I'm not saying there's no end in sight but it will take some time (to resolve)."
He said there were now more than 7,000 troops in the territory, which was integrated into Indonesia in 1976, while the leftist revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) had between 500 and 700 armed men. Murdani said Indonesia had faced two choices, the first was "to carry out a full scale conventional operation, the risks are that too many people will get hurt."
The second was a territorial operation, "In (US General) Westmoreland's words this is the struggle for the minds and hearts of the people. This is not something you can achieve in one or two years."
Clashes still occurred occasionally, Murdani said,"We know that we cannot get away from being ambushed once in a while and maybe some of our weapons, ammo, gets into their hands."
In a rare public assessment of guerilla strength, the commander said he took as a yardstick the 15,000 weapons Fretilin had in August 1975 when the conflict started. Some weapons were confiscated, others were damaged or defunct while the army had lost some of its weapons, he said, "The final number varies from between 500 and 700. Let's be a little conservative and say 1,000 weapons and 1,000 armed men which is not true at all because it's much less than 1,000," he said.
"When we fought the guerilla war against the Dutch we had four people running behind a man with a rifle so if he got killed or slipped then the other would pick it up. So 1,000 active members with anywhere between 3,000 and 5,000 symphatisers and on top of that half of them are married, they have two kids then you arrive at a number between 7,000 and 10,000. But they are never in one group fighting, just splinters."
Murdani said:"At one stage it was reported that we had 20,000 troops there (in East Timor). Maybe one third or half of them were teachers

to assist the local district chiefs, they were not all fighting men."
The Armed Forces now had 14 battalions of between 500 and 550 troops in East Timor with between 400 and 450 from each battalion doing line duty, he said.
"It's not a Grenada-type Operation or a Malayan insurgency," he said.
East Timor's population had a low level of education and there were also religious factors behind the conflict.
Murdani, himself a Catholic, said one reason why large-scale conventional operations were not launched was to avoid exacerbating religious differences between the Catholic Timorese and the predominantly Moslem troops. Before Indonesia took over the territory of 600,000 people the Christian Church played a part in the Portugese administration's decision-making process, he said.
The Church had not understood why it was not involved in running the territory when Indonesia took over. "They look on it as a very strange way of running a country... the people kept receiving wrong information from the priests," he added. The religious aspects of the conflict gave it an emotional factor, Murdani said. "We have realised this from the beginning and this is why we did not carry on large scale conventional operations."
Murdani confirmed that Air Force jets had carried out bombing runs in Timor but said this did not happen regularly.
Foreign journalists who have applied for permits to visit the province recently have been turned down. Asked why, he replied: "We are jittery with journalists."
Several Western Nations have expressed concern over alleged human rights' violations in East Timor. But support for Indonesia appears to have grown in the United Nations, which deferred debating an anti-Jakarta resolution on East Timor this year for the second consecutive year.
Western diplomats who recently visited parts of the territory reported that the atmosphere there appeared calm and there were no signs of food shortages.

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